IronWatch

Issue
10

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ABYSSAL TIDINGS

A Message from the Editor

Welcome again to the IRONWATCH! Mantic's new Kickstarter campaign for the Warpath skirmish game Deadzone is going strong, with more goodies being unlocked every few hours it seems!

This thrilling game from Jake Thornton combines the best aspects of boardgaming's ease-of-play with wargaming's strong use of terrain, cover, and customization. In addition, as of this publishing the Solo rules have been unlocked,, so you can even face your own wits against the howling monsters of the Deadzone's Plague!

Finally, the Kings of War sculpts have been flooding out, and apart from a few missteps, they look absolutely stunning! If you pledged as part of that KS< be sure to make any changes you want or additional Buy-One-Get-One offers by the deadline on June 2nd!

Thanks for reading, and as always, welcome to the Watch!

-Austin

Cover art by Boris Samec
Title art by Mark Smith

Please note that, while we here at **Ironwatch** *attempt to deliver you the best products and ideas we can, we cannot guarantee the balance of any scenarios or special rules presented herein. If you find any errors, grammar mistakes, or rule imbalances, please contact us on the Mantic Forums (Look for the discussion labeled "Ironwatch Issue X Feedback") and let us know what we could do to improve your fan-produced magazine. If you are interested in writing, illustrating, or editing for our magazine, please let us know on the feedback discussion as well so you can get in on the action!*

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UPCOMING NEWS FROM THE IRONWATCH!

By Michael DeFranco

Continue to Conquer your Foes! For Charity!

The Mantic Pathfinders in the UK are running a series of Kings of War tournaments to raise money for charity. Entry is easy – your army doesn't need to be painted and doesn't even need to be Mantic models which means almost anyone can play!

Each event lasts a day and you'll play 4 timed games of 1600 points (allies are permitted). The ticket price includes lunch and, as well as a winner's trophy, Mantic have provided some great prize support.

The winner also gets to choose which charity all the money from each day goes to (after expenses).

Later in the year there will be a national final too.

So what are you waiting for? Sign up today! Full details here:

http://forum.manticblog.com/showthread.php?2810-Pathfinder-KoW-tournaments-2013

and the tournament packs are here:

http://sdrv.ms/T8apY0

UPCOMING NEWS FROM THE IRONWATCH!

PRIZES FOR THE REGIONAL EVENTS

1st place - Winner's trophy. Signed new KoW book with choice of Ogre or Basilean army box on release week. Choice of the charity to receive the day's proceeds.

2nd place - signed new KoW book and an Ogre Unit.

3rd place - new KoW book on release.

Firestorm Games, Cardiff: WON BY CHRIS MORRIS (well done Chris!)

Marauder Games, Stockport: June 8th

Tabletop Nation, Hockley: June 29th

Thanks to Matt Gilbert for putting together the information for this event!▪

By "Sneaky Chris"

UPCOMING NEWS FROM THE IRONWATCH!

THE KOW VIRTUAL GAMING CLUB

KoW is a social game. Building and painting models can often be a solo activity, but playing the game usually requires a fellow enthusiast; someone to share a laugh with, share tactics with.. all whilst trying to slaughter their models before your own get trashed.

A number of us would have started our gaming lives in friendly local gaming stores (FLGS) or perhaps in Games Workshop's high street offering. As we got to know more and more people we'd perhaps think about starting a regular club – where we could play games that weren't supported by the FLGS; or use models that were non-GW.

But what happens if you want to play a new game that doesn't have a huge player base? Or you live far from other gamers? Or you're fed up of playing the same 3 people every week?

Solving these issues was the thought behind the KoW virtual gaming club. Using the power of Universal Battle (www.universalbattle.com) and Skype, players from around the world can meet up, virtually, and play KoW.

UPCOMING NEWS FROM THE IRONWATCH!

It has to be said that the games are not as good as playing face to face; as online poker is not the same as having the boys around for a few hands, but it does allow for people to get their fix.

The real benefit comes from the on-demand nature of the games. There are not set days, no set times. Just go to our Mantic Forum thread (http://forum.manticblog.com/showthread.php?3851-KoW-virtual-gaming-club) and ask if anyone fancies a game.

The Universal Battle software is fairly easy to learn, although I would recommend getting the "pro" version for $5 / 3 months access. This allows you to access the KoW specific armies created by KingOfSmurfs.

How successful is this format? Well, Darklord (Dan) and KingOfSmurfs (Chris) have been using it regularly to try out their armies for the Pathfinder events; 1st and 2nd at the Cardiff event was the eventual outcome. The US CoK champion has also played a game on the software against Dan – something that really couldn't have been done in real life.

As someone once said, "the more I practice the luckier I get". If you want to learn more about the virtual gaming club or universal battle, post on the thread and I'm sure someone will be able to help out.▪

The Summoning

By Jonathan Peace

PART 2

Hallek-Roi crashed to the floor. His face, once a constant bloom of red was now as pale as Dakarshae's skin. Steam vented in ragged bursts from the tubes around his neck. A low groan came from within his gilded armour. Dakarshae Kae slunk down beside the Abyssal Dwarf, her face close to his.

“I want the secrets of the Lower Abyssals. I want their strength, and you can help me get it.”

Hallek-Roi stared deeply into the eyes of the Priestess. Something burned deep within, hotter than the fires of the Abyss and the Overmaster found himself nodding, agreeing to her wild desires.

“Now stop whatever poison you cursed me with,” he demanded.

“Oh, this,” the Priestess said tracing the thin cut in his cheek. “That was nothing, merely a taste. You'll be fine in a minute or two.”

Fast as an eagle, she swooped down to kiss the Abyssal Dwarfs cheek, then swept away to make preparations for the ceremony to come. Hallek-Roi watched her go with hate in his eyes.

By Jonathan Faulkes

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She had changed for the ceremony. Gone were her usual robes, discarded for something more suitable to the situation.

She now wore a full warriors head-dress and armour bodice, the red-gore colouring edged with gold. Around her waist a girdle of Basilisk claw clinched tight, while across her left shoulder was a spaulder that rose to a sharp point. Dark sigils had been etched into the armour – for protection, the Overmaster had said. He had personally overseen the craftsmen as they carved the intricate symbols, making sure no mistake was made. Around her neck, a gorget of spun steel fastened to the lower part of the head-dress, creating the perfect protection for Dakarshae's head and face. Her black hair billowed behind her, set into a sharp pattern with aged wax. Dark robes of a deep blue hung from her waist, draping around her naked thighs. Long boots the colour of the darkest obsidian finished the ceremonial attire.

Now was not the time for such petty arguments. That would come later, he would learn his place or he would die

Dakarshae strode across the chamber to where Hallek-Roi stood beside an obsidian font. All the torches in the chamber save one had been extinguished, throwing the room into near darkness. Just the soft glow from the single torch illuminated the chamber, throwing strange patterns across the wall and floor. “All is ready?” she asked. The Abyssal Dwarf nodded.

“When we start, there are to be no interruptions.”

She didn't like his commanding tone, but she nodded her understanding. Now was not the time for such petty arguments. That would come later, he would learn his place or he would die. “We will not be disturbed,” she said.

“Good.”

Hallek-Roi stretched his arm out over the font, his other metal fist reaching underneath to grasp one of the many vent-tubes that ran the length of the

By “Maccwar”

By Matt Gilbert

Overmaster's arm. The clasp snapped open, steam hissing out like a thousand angry snakes.

"What are you doing?" Dakarshae asked.

"For the summoning to work, a sacrifice of blood must be given." As he spoke, red fire poured from the metal tube, falling into the ceremonial font in hot droplets. Where it struck it hissed, gathering together into a pool of hot lava. Hallek-Roi tilted his head back, eyes closed as his fire-blood drained into the font. Dakarshae's eyes widened further; she had known the Abyssal Dwarfs worked with fire and heat in their dark towers, but never this. A new respect for the dark Dwarfs filled her as she watched the Overmaster refasten the tube in place. He turned dim eyes to the Priestess.

"Now you."

Before she could reply, he snatched her arm, dragged it over the font and ripped a long furrow down her forearm, opening up the flesh with a jagged scrap of metal. The blade had been hidden in a small compartment in his armour, something she hadn't considered. The wound gaped like a fleshy mouth as blood began to roll down her arm to drip into the hot fire below. He held her arm in place despite her struggles. She beat at his back with her free hand, her skin blistering quickly against the hot metal of his armour.

As he spoke, red fire poured from the metal tube, falling into the ceremonial font in hot droplets. Where it struck it hissed, gathering together into a pool of hot lava

"Stop," she whispered. Already her strength was weakening as her lifeblood continued to

pour into the font. It hissed when it landed in the cloying mixture. Hallek-Roi began a low chant, the words thick and harsh to the Twilight Kin's ears. Each one was filled with hate and bile, a gruff litany that the Abyssal Dwarf spat out. Hot spittle flew with each word to steam on the floor. Still he held her arm, but she could feel his grip loosening. With a sudden movement, she snatched her arm from his grasp, clamping her hand about the wound.

When he opened his mouth, a wave of heat and steam washed over her.

"Are you mad!" she cried.

The Overmaster didn't reply save for another backhanded slap that opened a cut on the Priestesses forehead. She rolled back but didn't fall. Her angry retort stilled in her throat when she saw the eyes of the dark Dwarf boring into her. Gone was the flesh, replaced by something that squirmed and rolled in his head. When he opened his mouth, a wave of heat and steam washed over her. His voice was a guttural cough.

"*Nakkarsha mon-Elic van Raak*," he cried. A rising wind began to blow, lifting Dakarshae Kae's hair. It blew about her, whipping faster as the wind began to howl. The torch fastened to the wall blew out, throwing the room into temporary darkness, fuelled only by the steady glow from within the ceremonial font. The etchings about the carved obsidian now glowed with a dull warmth as though they were fuelled by the fire within.

A great roar sounded as lightning began to crackle from a point several feet above the font. Blue strands of energy rushed around the pair, causing sparks to explode from where they touched the walls and floor. Dakarshae watched as the Overmaster now began to steadily chant, his voice rising to be heard over the raging wind.

"Come, oh dark lords, so that we may serve you. Grant our request and our devotion is

By "Puggimer"

By "Sukura636"

An explosion of light and sound flooded the chamber, a rushing maelstrom that screamed as a portal of energy expanded.

yours. From our blood we give you life, from our sacrifice we give you power. Come to us. Serve us, as we serve you!"

With a powerful crack of thunder, the air split open, knocking the dark pair back as the wind whipped even faster. An explosion of light and sound flooded the chamber, a rushing maelstrom that screamed as a portal of energy expanded. It ripped wider as a creature of nightmare slowly came into being, its many appendages slathering at the widening cleft of energy. Dakarshae, horrified beyond comprehension felt the desire to flee but held her ground, standing strong as the wind whipped around her. She turned to Hallek-Roi to see his face bathed in the blue glow of energy, his eyes dancing with maniacal glee.

The Lesser Abyssal jumped through the portal to land in the Under-Dungeon chamber. No sooner had it straightened to its full height, the portal gave another scream and snapped shut with a thunderous explosion. The wind fell and all was silent save for the laboured breathing of Dakarshae Kae and the staccato hiss of steam as it vented from the armour of the Overmaster.

The creature towered over them both, its

legs powerful muscle as wide as both their bodies together. Its torso was a writhing mass of flesh, twisted and warped. Bone jutted from a dozen tears to wrap about the outside of its form, creating a breastplate of bone so thick no weapon could penetrate it. Where arms should be were thick tentacles that snapped and whipped around itself, coiling like a snake. Each one was puckered, the tips sharp like sword blades. Dakarshae knew a single stroke would slice an opponent open in a heartbeat.

It crouched bringing its head down low. Slowly it turned from Dwarf to Elf, its single eye never blinking. A dozen small mouths opened as one, its voice a multitude of tones. "Speak," it said, "which one calls me from my rest?"

Hallek-Roi stepped forward. "I do. I bound you here so that you may enlighten your servants with your wisdom and power."

"I know you," the Lesser Abyssal declared in a frightening tone, a single tentacle reaching out to point at the Abyssal Dwarf. "You've called me before you many times. Was I not generous enough? Did I not let you live for your arrogance, and yet you test me once more. Stupid creature. Brave... but stupid."

Dakarshae looked at the Overmaster. What had he done? What had he brought before her, into her very kingdom? The Abyssal Dwarf kept his attention on the Lesser Abyssal, steam venting from the tubes at his neck with increasing regularity.

By Jonathan Faulkes

A dozen small mouths opened as one, its voice a multitude of tones.

"I have need of you once more," he said.

"More twisted creations?" The Lesser Abyssal let out a laugh that made the Priestesses skin crawl. "More beasts of the Abyss to twist to your dark machinations, or is it more than that? You want to yoke my kins strength for your own mortal needs? We have no need for what you offer, and should there ever be anything we desire – we will take it!"

By Matt Gilbert

"I have need of you!" Dakarshae stepped forward, her fear gone. "I bind you now, demon of the Abyss."

Its single eye turned to her. "What would you learn?"

"There is one with power equal to mine. An Elf. I want her."

The many mouths of the creature of the Abyss all spread wide as its many-voiced laugh filled the chamber. "Power. Fame. Wealth. You mortals are so easy, so predictable, but worry not. I will give you what you seek."

"Power. Fame. Wealth. You mortals are so easy, so predictable, but worry not. I will give you what you seek."

*****

Weepy tendrils of smoke writhed and danced in the cool air of the Under-Dungeon. Dakarshae stared upward; her hands clasped her head, her mouth wide in a silent scream. Her face was bathed in the glow of the magic that swirled around the three figures, each one at a point of the font, their hands linked together, each one wrapped in a slimy tentacle of the Lesser Abyssal.

"Tell me. Tell me everything!" she screamed. A tower of Abyssal fire jetted from the bowl of the font, shooting upwards to strike the ceiling.

"I want to know it all!" The High Priestess shouted into the maelstrom, her hair whipping about madly. Hallek-Roi glanced at her, his eyes filled with a steadily growing fear. *This was madness, beyond all he had known.* He looked over at the grinning visage of the summoned Lesser Abyssal. Its one eye burned, reflecting the madness in the Twilight Kin's face.

It started to unwrap its tentacle from her grip but she clamped her hand down so hard the long metal spikes on her fingers cut into the slimy flesh. Ichor ran down between her fingers, staining her nails with its putrescence. The creature tried again to remove itself from her grasp but she held on tight.

"More!" she cried. "More!"

Hallek-Roi started to struggle now as he realised what was happening. How? How

had she tricked him so easily?

She turned a wicked grin to the Overmaster, nodding to the balcony hidden above them in the dark. “I will not be denied!”

Slowly he turned to look. Standing at the lip of the balcony, their bodies dripping blood from a dozen deep wounds, were the remainder of the Abyssal Dwarf's host. A score of captured Blacksouls, their faces unrecognisable beneath the punishment inflicted on their bodies stepped closer to the edge while behind them a row of Darksome Guard prodded at them with glaives of twisted dark-steel. Their armour had been stripped from them, their weapons taken. Naked and vulnerable, all the Abyssal Dwarfs could do was stand subjugated and hopeless.

The Lesser Abyssal made a small gesture with its tentacle, opening up the portal back to the Abyss. With a hiss of annoyance, it stepped through

“No,” the Overmaster cried. “No!”

Dakarshae Kae raised her head, the long tresses of her hair spilling down her back as she let out a horrible laugh. “Yes,” she cried. “Oh, yes!”

As one the Darksome Guard brought their glaives down in fast, sweeping cuts. Chunks of Abyssal Dwarf flesh fell away as a rain of blood covered the three figures in the chamber below. As the gore-streaked fragments of flesh hit the ceremonial fountain, a roaring cavalcade of energy exploded, twisting around the image of the girls face, its fingers of magic slamming through her face time after time.

The light filled the chamber so suddenly it seemed as though an explosion had occurred. It sent the shadows fleeing in to the furthest recess of the Under-Dungeon and broke the dark trinity. They fell back from each other, each crashing to the blood soaked floor. The Lesser Abyssal made a small gesture with its tentacle, opening up the portal back to the Abyss. With a hiss of annoyance, it stepped through.

By “left64”

By Jonathan Faulkes

A pale blood stained hand grabbed hold of it as Dakarshae tried to keep the creature from fleeing. “I need your power!” she cried.

The creature swatted at her but she clung on. “It's over,” it hissed. With no effort at all, it continued into the portal. Dakarshae hung on, her other hand grasping at a tentacle to try pull it back into the chamber. With a great crackling boom, the portal snapped closed.

Dakarshae screamed and fell back. Blood poured from the stump of her arm where the portal had snapped shut. She collapsed to the ground, her hand releasing the puckered tentacle of the lesser Abyssal. It slithered across the slick floor, coming to rest beside the stunned form of the Overmaster.

As silence and calm settled over the dark dungeon chamber, Hallek-Roi looked from the tentacle to the bloodied stump of the Twilight Priestess.

Slowly, a wicked grin spread across his face.

The thrice cursed Dwarf had fled before she'd woken, leaving her with his abomination of a gift

*****

In the Under-Dungeon, Dakarshae Kae stared in horror, her one good arm clinging to the ceremonial basin for support. Blood ran from her nose in a crimson stream as she steadied herself. Where her left arm once was, now only a twisted tentacle remained. It whipped about, an angry serpent of Abyssal flesh, fused to her body by the dark magic of Hallek-Roi. The thrice cursed Dwarf had fled before she'd woken, leaving her with his abomination of a gift.

But there was a sick bonus to the mutated appendage that even now writhed and twisted with a life of its own. Infused within its sickly flesh was the knowledge of the Lesser Abyssal. She had wanted to learn the secrets of the Abyss and now she had more.

So much more.▪

By Matt Gilbert

Raising an Army
A Guide for the Beginning Necromancer

A New Player's Guide to the Undead in Kings of War.

By Matt aka "Dustcrusher"

With assistance from Mantic Forum members Darklord, Fred, and Mr. EB (thanks for the help, guys!)

So you're new to Kings of War, or perhaps you're an existing player looking for a second army. There's an army for most every playstyle, and even within a faction there are plenty of options for running a viable list. This article's intent is to provide a summary of how the Undead play and a unit breakdown to allow you to make informed decisions before purchasing an army.

Before I continue, a couple of things for new players to keep in mind:

1. Unlike some other fantasy/ancient/medieval mass combat games, there's no real "power listing" in Kings of War. Your list won't win games- you will.

2. This is based on my experience and observations, with input from other experienced players. While I hope you find it helpful, it should by no means be considered absolute. Take *all* advice on how to play, including this article, with a grain of salt.

By "imm0rtal reaper"

By Chris Schlumpberger

With that said, here's a synopsis on the Undead:
The Undead have a mix of mostly slower units that are *Shambling* and cannot move At the Double, along with some fast but fragile units. In exchange, they have access to movement tricks via their Heroes with the *Dark Surge* ability, limited healing when the unit inflicts damage in melee (via *Evil Dead)*, and high Nerve values, including no Wavering value for many units.

Basic Infantry:

Some or all of these are likely to form the core of your army. Without infantry, all of your snazzy specialized troops, cavalry, and war engines will be overrun by your opponent.

Skeletons:
Skeletons are fairly inexpensive, basic infantry. They can pay extra for spears to gain *Phalanx* and buy an *Undead Giant Rat (Dog?)* to increase the effects of *Evil Dead*, healing 1 point of damage per point inflicted instead of a single point regardless. The low cost does have a price- they are weak in Melee with a 5+.

I feel there are two ways to run them best- one is in Regiments with no add-ons, and the other is a tricked out Horde with Spears and possibly a Rat/dog. I would not recommend using Troops unless the game is under 1000 points.

Zombies:
Ah, the humble zombie. While they don't have the options Skeletons do, a Horde of 30 Zombies gets 30 attacks (most Hordes get 20), and an Endless Swarm of 60 Zombies gets 40 attacks. At every troop size except Swarm (40), Zombies have a higher Nerve than their fleshless counterparts.

There are drawbacks- Zombies' defense is a weak 3+ so they are easy to hurt, and all those attacks are evened out by a Melee score of 5+. That said, Zombies don't care much about *Crushing Strength* or *Piercing* since they are already easy to wound. Units of 20 and 30 will blunt the enemy's advance, and the 40 and 60 Zombie units are roadblocks that will take either multiple turns or dedicated effort to rout.

Ghouls:
Ghouls are an anomaly- instead of being slow, higher Nerve value, and *Shambling,*

By Michael DeFranco

they are quick (base speed 6), can move At the Double, with lower Nerve value. They have a Melee of 4+, which is more difficult for your opponent to ignore, but their Nerve values are among the lowest in a mostly high -Nerve faction.

Ghouls can also be Wavered, and their low Defense of 3+ means they aren't durable, though as with Zombies, it renders *Piercing* and *Crushing Strength* less useful.

There are two ways I've seen Ghouls used- one is as a bait unit to tempt an enemy into overextending, and the other is as harrier/ skirmisher type troops that can get into an enemy fast- they can be good at finishing off weakened units.

Revenants:
Do the above three options seem too much like fodder to you? You want heavy infantry? Revenants are what you seek.

Revenants have a durable 5+ Defense, and a good 4+ Melee score. If you want them to hit harder they can trade shields for great weapons and smash foes with *Crushing Strength (1),* lowering Defense to 4+ in exchange*. Of course, these improvements come at an increased cost, but if you want heavy infantry, this is your unit.

*Unfortunately, Mantic has not produced models with this option at the time of this writing. There are alternatives available from other companies- or you could show off your modeling skills and convert them!

Specialist Infantry:

These units excel at a particular role, and are among the most interesting and thematic models in the faction.

Skeleton Archers:
It's the only other ranged unit you have besides the Catapult (which we'll get to later). Archers cost the same as normal Skeletons. In exchange for being able to

shoot at 5+, their Melee goes up to a pathetic 6+ and their Defense drops to 3+. Sadly, this makes them even weaker than Goblin Spitters, who can at least fight as well as they shoot.

Take either troops or perhaps a Horde with a Jar of the Four Winds to increase their range. A Regiment is not worth it- use those 15 points on a magic item instead. Skip the standard upgrade options (standard, musician, Rat/dog)- you want this unit to stay out of melee as long as possible- once charged, it crumbles quickly.

Wraiths:

Wraiths at first glance seem like super troops - they can *Fly* (don't forget this also means they are *Nimble*), have a 6+ Defense, *Crushing Strength (1)*, and a fleet base Movement of 10. They can be taken in units of 5, 10, and 20, so why not have an entire army of them?

First off, they are pricey. For the cost of a troop of 5 you can get 20 Revenants, or for 10 more points a Swarm of 40 Zombies. Second, they have a Nerve almost as low as Ghouls, so if any attacks get through they are likely to rout. Third, it is easy to overextend them with their superior movement rate, and lastly, most other units with *Fly* can also move At the Double (though this isn't all bad - see below).

Wraiths are a hunting unit. They excel at flanking and routing weakened units or destroying War Engines. Thanks to their high Move and *Fly*, they are one of the best units for sneaky tricks with *Dark Surge*- they can easily flank or hit a unit from behind this way.

By Boris Samec

Werewolves:
Werewolves are another devastating unit at first glance. They can't *Fly* like Wraiths but they are still *Nimble*. They have an excellent move of 9, and unlike Wraiths they are not *Shambling* so they can move 18" At the Double and pivot once. They also have the best base Melee (3+) and Defense (6+) scores in the game, so they will be perceived (rightly so!) as a threat.

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Downsides are like most Large Infantry- a relatively low number of attacks for cost, and like Ghouls they can be Wavered. Their nerve is average among living troops, so it looks sub-par compared to their *Shambling* counterparts. As with Wraiths, Werewolves are expensive.

Werewolves are the other hunting unit option. They can get in your opponent's face quickly, and even a single Wolf hitting a flank gets 6 attacks at 3+. Single Werewolves can fit through narrower gaps between units and will destroy War Engines if they don't get shot trying to reach them. Unlike Wraiths, they don't need *Dark Surge*, so they can operate independently.

Mummies:
If Revenants are heavy infantry, Mummies are shock troops. 6+ Defense, *Crushing Strength (2)*, and *Regeneration* means they will be tough to eliminate and will hurt just about anything they hit…if they get there. Unfortunately, Mummies are speed 4, making them even slower than most of the rest of the army, and their cost is along the lines of Wraiths.

If you know you are playing a scenario and not just rolling for one of the default game types, Mummies can be stubborn objective defenders- just watch out for Fire Oil, *Breath Attacks*, and *Zap!* spells. If you want to try a two-lined approach to your deployment, they could be used as a counter to overeager *Flying* units that want to get behind your main line.

Wights:
What if Mummies just aren't strong enough for you? You want something that can hack down the castle gate, *then* slay the cowards hiding behind it. Wights can do both.

Wights have a uniquely small unit size (3

figures) and as such they can fit into small gaps easily. *Vicious* gives them a reroll on a failed Wound roll, and they have- get this- *Crushing Strength (4)*! Who knew three normal sized undead could be so strong?

Their Melee value is average (4+) and they get 9 attacks, which is in line with a unit of 3 Werewolves. The Wights are also *Shambling* so they can be *Dark Surged*. -/15 Nerve is pretty sturdy for a unit this size. They are slow-moving, flightless Wraiths that hit like a War Engine.

A Defense of 5+ is good, but your opponent will look to take them out as soon as possible, so use a fodder unit to shield them until they are in position.

Cavalry:

Units on horses (or other mounts). They are highly mobile offensive troops- they will crush weaker units under their mounts' feet, but don't expect them to hold the line for an extended period.

Revenant Cavalry:
These guys are excellent. I've been trying to be fair about each unit's strengths and weaknesses, but I'm having a hard time here. I'll present this like a recipe:

Take 10 Revenants. Subtract 2 Attacks. Add *Crushing Strength (2)* but keep their Defense at 5+. Melee stays the same at 4+. Increase their base Speed to 8 and leave *Shambling* for movement fun. Increase their total base size from 100x40mm to 125x50mm.

Now, you'd think all this would cost more than a base unit of 10 Revenants on foot, right? It doesn't! Both are 85 points. You're trading in two Attacks for increased speed

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By Boris Samec

and wounding ability- absolutely worth it.

They aren't perfect, though- Most other factions' mounted troops have a 3+ Melee score. Dwarf Brock Riders don't but they get more attacks and a higher Nerve. Goblin Fleabag Riders are weaker, but they get Nimble and they are cheaper. *Shambling* allows for movement tricks but the other races can move At the Double.

Cavalry Regiments are solid- 70 more points adds 8 more attacks and 3 more Nerve, but it's tough to not take 2 Revenant Cavalry Troops instead, unless you're experimenting with cavalry-centric army.

Soul Reavers:
These guys are among the best cavalry in the game, but it comes with a very high price tag - 1 Troop of 5 Soul Reavers costs **100 points** more than a Revenant Cavalry Troop.

Now, with that said, that 100 points buys you things the Revenant horsemen are lacking- Melee 3+, Defense 6+, 13 Attacks, and 12/14 Nerve. Only Dwarf Brock Riders have better Nerve and Attack numbers, and their Melee and Defense are both 4+. Soul Reavers' Defense is the best of any cavalry in the game. These guys will hit what they charge very, very hard- and woe be to anyone flanked or hit from behind by these guys.

In addition to the cost, Soul Reavers trade a lack of *Shambling* for being subject to Wavering. These guys are the closest thing to a "Death Star" unit that the Undead have- maneuver them well and they will probably be your MVPs- leave them vulnerable and they will be an expensive casualty.

War Engines:

You have one choice- the Balefire Catapult. 65 points for *Blast (2d6), Indirect Fire, Piercing (3),* and *Shambling* is a pretty good buy, if you take more than one. Any hit will almost certainly take wounds, and any target you can see between 12 and 48" can be shot.

Outside of siege games (where you'll likely want at least two), the Balefire is an interesting option, but not mandatory. Use them to soften up high defense targets or rout screening troops.

Heroes and Personalities:

These are the Heroes (well, villains mostly) that will lead your forces to victory over the living. These personalities are where your *Dark Surge* is going to come from; in addition, they give you access to other abilities like *Zap!* and *Inspiring*, and a few are powerful combatants in their own right.

Mhorgoth the Faceless:
This is the Undead faction's named Hero. He's a walking, er, *Flying* toolkit of abilities. His only mediocre stat is a 4+ Melee, but you shouldn't be using it anyway.

Problem is, he is ridiculously expensive. Get the model- it's a great sculpt, and use it as a normal Necromancer or a Liche King depending on what you prefer. I'd only field him as Mhorgoth in special scenarios or games over 2500 points.

Vampire on Undead Pegasus:
A flying Cavalry monster and low level Necromancer all in one. He's pretty tough and trades a lot of magical ability for melee might. Also has *Inspiring* built-in and can block units because he's not an *Individual.* He can be a pretty cool centerpiece, but I'd probably reserve him for games of at least 1600 points.

Undead Army Standard Bearer:
Every army has standards, and most of the time they are worth taking (except Goblins- the Wiz is a far better deal). They're a cheap source of *Inspiring,* giving you an extra reroll against bad Nerve checks. If you worry about having the Standard in the right place you can add a mount for additional flexibility, and giving them magic items (the *Healing Charm* is a fun one) can make them more versatile. Keep them out of combat, though- they are fragile.

Cursed Pharaoh:
Like his Mummy brethren, this guy is tough- his nerve is even higher than Mhorgoth's. Melee 4+ and 5 Attacks is decent with *Crushing Strength (2).* He's *Inspiring* and can

By "left64"

Dark Surge Mummies, and has Regeneration as well. I'd avoid using him in normal lists- if you're using 2 or more units of Mummies, take him- he's tough enough to wade in alongside them. Otherwise, you're better off with someone else.

By Matt Gilbert

Vampire Lord:
This guy is powerful, but he has a key drawback. First, the good- He's fast (Speed 7), powerful in Melee with a 3+, 6+ Defense, *Crushing Strength (2)*, *Inspiring*, plus he has all of the abilities of a Necromancer except for a weaker *Dark Surge*.

For the price, his Nerve's a tad on the low side. Then there's the big problem- his cost. The Lord is a mere 10 points less than the Vampire on Undead Pegasus. Those 10 points gets you *Fly*, 3 more inches of movement, and the loss of *Individual*. The mount option for the Vampire Lord is even more pointless- it costs 10 points more than the Pegasus-mounted version and increases your move by 1 measly inch.

So why take this Hero over the Pegasus-mounted version? The Vampire Lord has a smaller base size, the increased mobility of *Individual,* 6+ Defense, and a larger pool of magic items to use. The Lord's not a bad choice per se, but for the cost, I think the Pegasus, or two Revenant Kings and points to spare, are better choices.

Necromancer:
Necromancers are one of the mainstay Individuals in the Undead faction. They are the cheapest source of *Dark Surge*, *Heal*, and *Zap!*. His *Dark Surge (8)* is only 2 dice behind the Liche King and 4 dice behind Mhorgoth. He's not Inspiring (though you can mitigate this for one by taking the Talisman of Inspiration), and if he gets caught in melee, he's dead.

The Necromancer should be using one of his spell abilities each turn. A mount will give you more flexibility in getting him where he needs to be.

Liche King:
This guy is for when the normal Necromancer is not enough. 3 more points

of Nerve, 2 more dice of *Dark Surge, Heal, and Zap!* for 70 points. He's still much cheaper than Mhorgoth. A mount might be a good idea for him- what's another 20 points when you're spending 180 on him already?

He's the Necromancer, High-Octane edition. If you're thinking about taking Mhorgoth, save your points and take a Liche King and two Necromancers instead- you'll get a lot more out of them.

Revenant King:
The other mainstay Individual and counterpart to the Necromancer. The Revenant King loses *Heal, Zap!,* and 2 dice of *Dark Surge* compared to his mage counterpart. In exchange you get increased durability, good melee ability, and *Inspiring.*
A mount can be a good idea for this guy, too.

I think Necromancer versus Revenant King (a subject which has been discussed many times among Undead Players) is best saved for a future article. I would recommend trying a mix of the two- both have their uses and it will likely come down to how you want to play your army.

The Next Step- Recruiting Your Minions
The One Player Battle Set and the Two-Player Battle Set are good starting points- you will definitely want at least one or two units of infantry no matter what else you're fielding, and both give you a sample of three of the four basic infantry types.

From there, it's up to you. There are many ways to run any Kings of War army, and Undead have the potential for some of the most unusual (and fun) lists in the game.

Remember, to the Necromancer, today's enemy may become tomorrow's ally with a little dark magic…▪

By Boris Samec

it's a job

part 3

By Aaron Magno

By Matt Gilbert

The Anvor System was "discovered" by the Corporation several generations ago and has been a profitable part of the galaxy with mining operations throughout the system. Anvor-5 was especially profitable as it was habitable planet for humans and provided large areas for agriculture. Now, however, there was a problem…

The Corporation battle cruiser Unity orbited Anvor-5 at a distance greater than the planet's artificial satellite system but was far closer than it's two moons. A plethora of devices on board the Unity were trained at the planet's surface measuring a number of different aspects. However, not all observations were being made electronically or with any degree of precision. Lozan, for example, merely stared through a window at the planet slowly rotating below him. Officially Lozan was a marine in the Corporation's vast armed forces. In practice Lozan had a very specific task, eradicate Veer-myn wherever they hid. The last part of that statement, "wherever they hid", was an important distinction. The Veer-myn presence had increased to the point that they were capable of forming military units comparable in size to anything present in the Corporation's armed forces. This has led to instances of Corporate forces being engaged with Veer-myn armies in conflicts that can only be described as war. Lozan was not involved in the eradication of Veer-myn at that scale. Instead, Lozan's role was to hunt down small pockets of Veer-myn infestation whether they occur on ships, space stations

or as in the case of the upcoming mission, planet-side amongst a Corporation colony.

Not being part of the large scale battles that other members of the Corporation's armed forces had engaged in resulted in Lozan and his peers being treated with a certain lack of respect and earned those such as Lozan the somewhat derisive label of rat catcher. As Lozan stared down at the continents that would peak out from beneath the cloud cover he wondered how the inhabitants of Anvor-5 would judge him and his fellow rat catchers. The Corporation does a very good job controlling the flow of information throughout the Great Galactic Co-prosperity Sphere, especially information that doesn't quite reflect the story of prosperity that the Corporation prefers to present. Lozan correctly assumed that the denizens of Anvor-5 had never heard of the Veer-myn until now. Of course, if the rat catchers had been called in then they were now very aware of how dangerous the Veer-myn could be. It was something Lozan and his teammates had been painfully reminded of on their last mission.

Of course, if the rat catchers had been called in then they were now very aware of how dangerous the Veer-myn could be

The door behind Lozan opened but he did not avert his gaze from the planet below.

"Damn it Loz, do you know how many observation decks there are on this thing?", yelled the newest entrant into the room, "I don't even know what your fascination with

By "Hellebore"

By "Badgertheking"

Natural? What makes natural so amazing? We've made everything better, more refined, more civilised

those balls of dirt is anyway. Besides we'll be down there soon enough anyway. So come on, we need to get ready."

"I've been ready for the last half an hour," said Lozan as he turned towards his teammate, Abist, at the door.

Both men were dressed in their full combat gear sans their helmets and weapons.

"Loz, you know Sarge, you're not ready till you're strapped in for the drop," said Abist.

Lozan took a final quick glance outside before heading towards Abist and asked his teammate, "You're really not excited about getting planet-side are you? I mean, how long has it been?"

"Teenak-3 and that was horrible," replied Abist as he moved into the hallway to await Lozan.

"Oh, Teenak doesn't count. What about Lasduet, I wouldn't mind getting back there," countered Lozan as he joined Abist in the hallway.

Lozan continued to make his case as the two of them made their way to the hangar, "I mean, you've got natural gravity and a real atmosphere, what's not to like?"

"Natural? What makes natural so amazing? We've made everything better, more refined, more civilised," said Abist.

"We civilised the air?", queried Lozan as he paused for a second but not giving Abist enough time to respond, "Well all I know is that I'm looking forward to that natural sunlight, get my tan back. I mean I'm almost as pale as you right now."

"I'll grant you that. If spending some time on a planet is the sacrifice I have to make to not be as white as that freak Kosheer then get me down there," said Abist with a slight chuckle having amused himself at the

expense of his absent teammate.

*****

Elsewhere aboard the Unity the leaders of the half dozen rat catcher sections that were to be deployed on Anvor-5 were gathered around their superior, Commander Redavnissa. He might have been the most diminutive member at this gathering but as commander he was clearly the most powerful man in the briefing room. His authority was never questioned, at least not publicly. As with all figures in positions of authority what was said by their subordinates behind closed doors never quite matched the public perception.

"…and based on that information we do not anticipate any noteworthy resistance in terms of force. The hardest part of this operation will be locating the targets," concluded Redavnisa as he touched the flat digital energy panel hovering before him, which he had used to illustrate key pieces of information during his briefing, "Moving to other matters, those of you without complete sections have been assigned new recruits straight out of the academy."

The Commander reached into his pocket and pulled out eight small black disks, which he proceeded to hand out to some of the team leaders around him. After handing the final disk to Sergeant Grimmon he turned and headed towards the exit of the room where his assistant was waiting. The group of sergeants dispersed shortly afterwards after some meaningless exchanges between the members. Soon only Sergeant Grimmon remained in the room.

The Sergeant was a big man, partly due to his slightly above average height but mostly

The Commander reached into his pocket and pulled out eight small black disks, which he proceeded to hand out to some of the team leaders around him

because he had spent his entire adult life as part of the Corporation's military service. The toned body of his youth was a distant memory but the muscle mass he had built up in those early days remained. He looked older than he actually was and had taken to sporting a thick full beard to hide some of the wearied look on his face. In contrast he kept the top of his head completely shaven. Grimmon looked down at his hand as he slid the black disc between his fingers waiting for

By Jonathan Hicks

his second in command, Corporal Kreesa. He did not have to wait long as Kreesa soon entered the room wearing his combat fatigues with his helmet cradled under his left arm and the sergeant's held in his right hand. Kreesa's colleagues had joked that he didn't need a helmet since his overly stylized hair was so hardened with gel that it would protect him from most projectiles. The corporal didn't mind these jibes as he took pride in his fashionable appearance, even going as far as to wear non-functional glasses with rims as black as his hair.

"So, that's the new guy?" asked Kreesa as he motioned towards the disk.

When his subordinate spoke Grimmon stopped fiddling with it and slid the disk to the centre of his palm. He then tapped the centre of the disk twice and its interior glowed red before projecting an energy screen, which presented the details of the newest addition of his team.

"Mihltuk's replacement, yes," responded Grimmon.

Both men studied the information floating between them before Grimmon spoke again, "Not really a prized recruit is he?"

"We're rat catchers, we're never going to get anybody decent. Doesn't help that Redavnisa's had it in for us for a while now. I bet the favourite Gorjas got the pick of the bunch," was Kreesa's response.

The best of the bottom of the barrel isn't really helpful

"The best of the bottom of the barrel isn't really helpful," said Grimmon, "This Rothis kid has a pretty interesting track record when it comes to dealing with authority and regulations."

"He should fit right in with the Grim Reapers then," observed Kreesa.

"Well, we'll just have to make sure he does," Grimmon said with a wicked grin.▪

By "Skolo"

By "SneakyChris"

BREACH

By Michael Grey

Containment Protocol - Incident Ref#: 0000037..Time Stamp - minus 00:56

There was Dreadball on the entertainment screen. There was always Dreadball on the entertainment screen. Cole wasn't a fan, and knew he was in the minority because of that, but it was hard to appreciate the sport when you saw the net result of skirmishes between rival fans in the emergency room. He counted himself lucky Gaian 16 was too new a colony to have its own team. When that momentous day came he could kiss every Saturday night goodbye for the rest of his working life.

The screen had attracted a usual crowd of roughnecks, gathered at the carriage's end while the monorail threaded its way through Gaian Prime's precincts. They cheered at some especially brutal impact, and then animatedly rated it against the one from last night or the night before.

Cole yawned and looked through the window. Gaian Prime slid by, made clean and almost palatable by velocity. It was only when the 'rail halted at a station did the ever presence litter and algae staining show itself before they moved off, blurring to the uniform grey of plasticrete Sphere-wide.

Just another day in the outer colonies.

He closed his eyes and leant into the seat. Was this really what he'd wanted? Being part of the push outwards from the core worlds had seemed so enticing at the recruitment office. So romantic. Graphs of rolling plains, infinite horizons. The taming of frontiers. Becoming self-sufficient, away from the meagre hand outs of the corporations.

And instead; this. Pretty much held hostage in a Bubbled city until his passage was paid

off and he could go…. Where? Another establishment colony like Gaian? As far as he knew, this was as good as it got out here.

He opened his eyes when the game cut off mid-play, replaced by the preened face of a man with a forced grin to the jeers of the fans below.

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When the face spoke it was with the stilted delivery of a facet recording, separate sound files spliced to play a coherent message. "Good morning, fellow Gaians! This is Kamal McMahon, the governor of Gaian 16 and your public servant, wishing you a pleasant morning. The temperature is currently 33 degrees in our fine city, climbing to a high of 44 with a humidity of 80 percent, so be sure to keep cool and drink plenty of water. Enjoy your day, and remember; each one of you is as indispensable to the colony as I am." An insincere wink and he was gone. One of the teams had done something in the meantime to cause the men below to swear. One spat on the floor. Cole yawned again.

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Gaian Prime General Hospital heaved. One of the first municipal buildings constructed on the fledgling colony, and built to serve the bare minimum the corp protocols demanded for the resident numbers at the time. It was pretended the inevitable population boom would ever come, credits changed hands, the right boxes were ticked and due diligence was seen to have been observed.

Fast forward thirty years and the original hospital still stood, as recognisable in design as the day the doors opened, if not in the queues of sick and injured leading out from every door, laying and sleeping on moss-covered pavements in an intangible race between their turn and possible death.

Enjoy your day, and remember; each one of you is as indispensable to the colony as I am

Cole rushed from the change room to surgery, pulling on sterile whites and securing a facemask. He had been early for

his shift, but time and industrial accidents wait for no one and the previous shift's nurses were still in other theatres.

"Male, 23, slipped with a circular saw and caught it in the upper intestinal tract"

He reached the ER door as another nurse arrived, pulling a wheeled and battered halogen light. "Morning Cole. Just in time." She nodded at the door. He opened it with a flamboyant wave.

"What do we have Jean?" He followed her through into a surgery mid-prep. Empty boxes of medicines, syringes and the like leaned stacked against the walls. Other boxes and discarded wipes lay around them, kicked to one side by busy medicos to clear the floor around the central table and left for a clean up the room was always too busy to receive. Cole caught a glimpse of green fingering its way out from behind one of the stacks. Even here the omnipresent algae found root.

"Male, 23, slipped with a circular saw and caught it in the upper intestinal tract." As she wheel the light into position the surgical covering on the bed shifted and emitted a pained cry which descended into a groan. "Anaesthesia's still setting in," she finished.

At the table a doctor leant over the patient, hands busy and out of sight. He looked up at the light as the nurse aimed it down. "And what's this?"

"Industrial light from the construction next door," she said. "The builder's haven't arrived yet and I don't think they need it as much as him." A nod to the table.

"No hospital ones…?" the doctor let the question trail hopelessly. "At least tell me it's clean."

"Sprayed it twice with disinfectant, Doctor."

He accepted that with a nod and noticed Cole. "Ah, good, an extra pair of hands, we can begin. If you wouldn't mind nurse." The doctor looked back down and administered an injection. Cole ripped off a salute only Jean saw. Her eyes crinkled and she waved him to stop.

She connected the light as he pulled a tray of implements to the table, and then pulled over the G-Net screen. It hung suspended from the ceiling, allowing Cole to angle it over the now-unconscious patient's head. The screen blinked, clicked, prompted Cole

By "Daedle"

for a password which he gave, and then connected to the greater-network. The screen showed a doctor in theatre whites.

"Please state the nature of the procedure," it said in an accentless voice.

Without looking up the doctor said, "Male, mid-twenties, basic none augmented, no known allergies. Patient has multiple clean lacerations through the upper intestine between the transverse and ascending colon caused by an industrial saw."

"Is the patient stable?" the screen doctor asked.

The doctor looked at Cole who checked the vital readout. "He is."

The G-Net screen flicked as files were access, then segued to the image of the screen doctor bent over the representation of a patient with similar injuries. "Begin by removing obstructions and cleaning the wounds."

"All done," said the doctor.

"Aesthetic will wear off in just over 90 minutes, doctor"

The screen flicked again, fast forwarded to a later phase. "The intestinal lacerations can now be cauterised. Begin by-"

Cole looked up. So did the doctor and Jean. The screen showed black with bold white letters saying 55760 ERROR – CONNECTION UNAVAILABLE. The full stop blinked off and on while they watched.

Cole reached out, used his index knuckle to turn the screen off and back on.

Nothing.

The doctor looked between the patient and the screen again. "Try again nurse." Cole did to the same effect. He saw a sheen across the doctor's forehead. The G-Net had ever gone down before, and without it they would have to rely on themselves and what little training they had.

The doctor blinked.

"Aesthetic will wear off in just over 90 minutes, doctor," said Jean. She sounded calmer than Cole felt.

"Very well." The doctor coughed and shook his head. "Nothing we haven't done before, I'm sure we'll be fine. Charge up the cauteriser, we'll begin there."

By Matt Gilbert

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Fifteen hours later in a bar off Landing Square, Cole downed his second beer to try and calm his shaking hands.

If Doctor Hygiene back there was anyway competent he wouldn't be on this armpit of a world

"I still don't see what your problem is." Jean sat opposite him, still on her first drink.

"I think you would had you been onplanet as long as me. I've had to remind that doctor to wash his hands before an op once." He forced swallowed the beer. Light and fizzy; cheap to make and easy on the hangover. Just as the colonies liked it.

"I think you're exaggerating."

He wasn't. "How much training did you have? When you were in the recruitment office on whatever world you came from. When you looked down the list of required jobs, had you had any medical training?"

She shook her head. "You know I didn't."

"And neither did I. Nurse, sounded fun and a few pay grades above shit shoveller. A completed aptitude test and basic training on route and bam, in at the deep end. Do you know how much extra training a doctor needs here?"

She didn't answer, just sipped her drink and let him get it off his chest.

"They have to complete basic medical school. *Complete*. Not *pass*. If Doctor Hygiene back there was anyway competent he wouldn't be on this armpit of a world."

"He can't be that bad. He patched that boy up without the G-Net telling him how."

"Lucky for the poor son of a bitch it was something we'd done before with no complications. I dread to think what happens if the G-Net's not back up tomorrow."

Jean looked uncomfortable and he felt she was resisting the urge to look at her watch. That was when he realised how drunk and bitter he sounded.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Just letting off steam. It'll be better tomorrow."

***

The monorail home was as packed as that morning, only this time the sports fans beneath the vid screen were actually drunk instead of just acting like it.

Cole tried to tune them out, closing his eyes to the Bubble's ever present orange glow. He gave up when a crushed beer can clattered down the carriage.

He opened his eyes and his attention was drawn to the noise coming from the crowd. It was different from this morning. He paid more attention and realised it wasn't the score line they were swearing at.

"Same bloody game as Monday, mate. Saw it myself."

They're repeating a game? Cole did not know much of Dreadball, but what little he did included that there were enough teams to show several live games each night. A repeat was something he had never heard of.

On the screen armoured athletes threw themselves violently into each other as a ball sped by at sub-sonic speeds. It could have been any game. He didn't even know the team colours.

By Mark Relf

He closed his eyes again and tried to ignore the noise.

***

Cole did not know much of Dreadball, but what little he did included that there were enough teams to show several live games each night. A repeat was something he had never heard of.

His apartment building was silent. This time of night most of the occupants would be asleep or at night shifts outside of the Bubble, farming the ultra-growth vegetation

before it could grow back.

He reached his apartment, key card ready, when he saw the tape on the door frame. Just a short strip of clear cello tape, half hanging as if someone had unstuck it from their fingers as they passed. Easy to miss and easy to explain.

The door opened wider showing nothing but darkness beyond, no sign of the person holding the door

Or, in this case, with a different meaning. He sighed. He really just wanted his bed before the shift tomorrow. Instead he walked to the next door and rapped lightly. No answer. He tried again and leant in. "Cas?"

His own door opened a crack. "Here," said a voice.

He looked between the two doors. "What are you-?" he began.

"Shh! Get in here."

The door opened wider showing nothing but darkness beyond, no sign of the person holding the door. He walked in. "Don't mind if I do, it being my apartment."

A hand shot out, grabbed his shirt and pulled him all the way in. The door closed fast, just short of slamming. He stumbled in, looked at the back of the figure peering through the security hole. She held a hand out toward him, waving down in a 'keep quiet' motion. He did, forcing back another sigh.
After a second of nothing happening the figure turned around. "Coast clear, you can turn the lights on."

"Why thank you very much." He was used to his neighbour's paranoia-driven decisions. Breaking into his apartment was a new one, but he'd known her long enough to not be surprised. Her position with the military gave Cas access to training which allowed her to indulge in her conspiracy theories, 'And lets me keep an

By "Skolo"

eye on the bastards' she would remind him.

But when he flicked the switch he got a surprise. A heavy looking pistol was holstered at her hip. He had grown used to the absence of weapons. Firearms where illegal inside the city, and to see one made him uneasy.

"You, er, you supposed to be wearing that off duty?"

"No." She pushed passed him to the lounge windows and pulled back the blinds to look outside. "It's not the Marine's, I have to check those in. This is mine."

"Well that's a comfort. Tea? Boil the water twice."

"Boil the water twice." She said it at the same time and gave what was planned to be an angry look but which quickly turned into a grin.

He made himself busy in the kitchenette. "To what do I owe the pleasure? Not that I don't mind visitors but I usually like them to arrive after me."

"It's happening," she said from the window. "It's always been happening, at least if I were to believe you the other times too."

"This time I'm right."

Firearms where illegal inside the city, and to see one made him uneasy

He looked at her while she peered outside. The gun was still secured in its holster, but just having it there she risked her job or even being shipped to a penal colony.

"And what's so different about this time?"

She left the window, came to the kitchen bench and slid her tablet along the top to Cole. He picked it up. "And?"

"Check the mails," she said. He did. Her inbox was a barren affair, a few reply prompts from obviously fake G-Net handles, some

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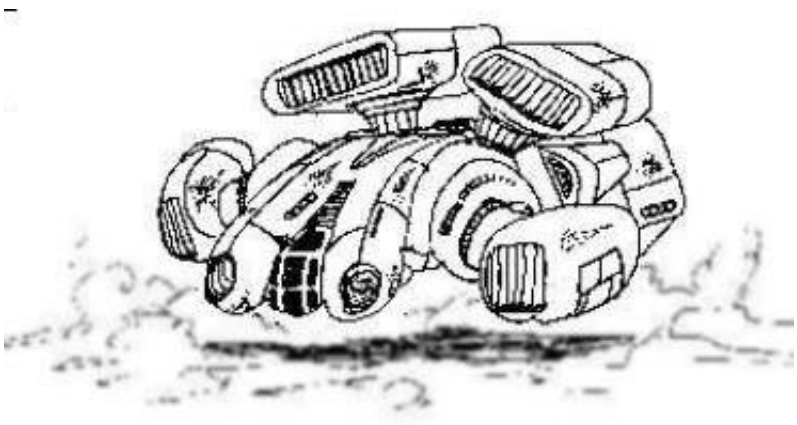

By Jonathan Hicks

spam. Nothing personal. But at least regular mails, a few every hour. But nothing from the past day.

We have 275, a relay station the size of a small moon powered by a dedicated fusion reactor, and a backup to that on a further orbit. A planet does not just drop off the G-Net

He pulled out his own and checked. The past day was empty also, the last refresh showing as 7:36am, about the same time the G-Net went off in surgery.

He tried connecting. Nothing. It showed connection to the local network, but nothing more, nothing from the Sphere.

He looked at Cas. "It's not just that," she said and picked up the TV remote. She flicked on the major news channel. What should have been rolling reports from across the Sphere showed some local news story from a satellite township. Instead of trade wars, some plans for an enclosed highway. She flicked to the next channel to show something similar. "It's the same with each. Reruns of everything already shown. The only live stuff is from onplanet. Even the-"

"-Dreadball," he finished staring at his tablet. She smiled as if she had just won something. "You're learning."

He didn't like feeling as if he was being played with, but that annoyed him perhaps more than it should. He put it down to stress and an increasing need for sleep, and refused to entertain the thought he might be worried. "It doesn't have to mean anything. So we lost connection to the greater network, so what?" He ran his hand through his hair and poured them tea.

But even if it didn't mean something the notion was, if not worrying then... disquieting. Not unlike waking up to find your apartment door locked from the outside and phone disconnected.

"Do you know just how many satellites orbit this planet?"

He shook his head and sipped his tea. "Three? Five? How many do you need for a small operation like this?"

"An operation of 300 million people requires not less than 250 active sats at any one time. Council protocol. We have 275, a relay station the size of a small moon powered by a dedicated fusion reactor, and a backup to that on a further orbit. A planet does not

just drop off the G-Net, Cole."

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She sounded so sure. And something else. He shook his head. Cas burned with the need to tell everyone she met her conspiracy theories, be they about the suppressed news of planets successfully overthrowing their corporate yokes or secretive council death squads. They all came down to how the Sphere citizens were covertly controlled. As if they needed anything more covert than 24-hour Dreadball and reality head-cam shows.

Exhaustion made his eyes burn. "I'm sure it's no big deal. I mean, we can't perform any major surgery without it, I'm just not sure it means anything."

"The hospital's down?"

"Well, yeah. They all share the same connection."

"Just after Seven thirty?"

He guessed where she was going. He was wrong.

"The defence force's connection is down as well."

That's the first directive for any commanding officer in a tactical situation with no intel: secure your base

It took a moment for him to realise what she meant. "The Marines'?"

She nodded. "They're trying to make like there's nothing wrong, and not doing it very well. As of this morning all leave has been cancelled and everyone's been recalled to Prime. That's the first directive for any commanding officer in a tactical situation with no intel: secure your base."

The frightening thing was she made perfect sense. He cut the thought off before it could take root. It was late, he was tired and Cas was on one of her paranoia rants. But he knew better than to argue with her, and

even if he wanted to he didn't have the energy.

"Okay, let's say *it is happening*," he air quoted. "What do we do? And more to the point; why? Gaian's only export is refried vegetable mush. We're not near any trade routes or other planets, we have little military presence. So why?"

"Why is the great question, partner, but knowing we have to find a 'why' is half the fight." She picked up her tea and downed the hot drink in a single pull. Cole winced. "I'm just letting you know. Keep your eyes open, eh?" She went to the door and performed a complicated but well executed check outside before leaving.

His head swam. He didn't believe Cas, of course he didn't. He had become used to her theories, and none of them ever eventuated. But still, the idea of being cut off from the Sphere made him uncomfortable. He had never felt so… disconnected.

He lay down, and when it became obvious sleep would never come, spent the rest of the night flicking through TV channels.

***

The G-Net was still down. Procedures at the hospital had been reprioritised to emergencies first and then anything the doctors felt competent enough to perform without guidance second. But there was another problem.

"What, none?"

"Ran out last shift," said jean.

But still, the idea of being cut off from the Sphere made him uncomfortable. He had never felt so… disconnected.

"But none? No anaesthetic in the whole hospital?"

"Frak, I don't know! That's why you have to go check. You're more senior, they'll take you more seriously than me."

By Boris Samec

All anaesthesia had been used up in the continuous procedures and operations throughout the last night, according to Jean. He had known they were running low, but then again that was nothing new. The hospital was always running low, but amongst the constant flow of ships and supplies coming in from outsystem to feed an establishing world were the primary supply ships from the corp home planets, stocked with munitions for the marines and medical supplies for the hospitals. The ships' arrivals were reliable enough that Cole had long accepted the state as a norm.

Skeletal shelves which should have held pallets of boxes were empty, allowing him to see all the way through them to the building's rear.

By "Hellebore"

The situation was confirmed by the supply office manager.

"Not a goddamn one, and will you people please stopping asking for them."

She looked harried. Her face red with strands of hair dangling loose from her ponytail. Behind her the small warehouse looked bare. Skeletal shelves which should have held pallets of boxes were empty, allowing him to see all the way through them to the building's rear.

"You do realise," he began.

"Yes I realise exactly what you can and can't do without them. I've been told a hundred times in two hours, but it does not change that we don't have anything."

Cole closed his eyes and told himself to calm down. When he opened them again he tried to think logically. "When was the last shipment due?"

"Yesterday afternoon," she said without checking. He guessed she'd been asked this a hundred times as well.

By Mantic Games, Used with Permission

When she didn't offer anything more he said, "And? Where is it?"

She stopped scribbling on her pad and banged her pen onto the counter. She looked at him above the rim of her glasses. "If I knew that I would have told you. It just didn't come in, and I don't have anyone spare to go find out why."

"Then I'll do it. Where do I go?" He said it before he realised, but then again what else was he going to do today?

She looked at him a moment longer, then, "Okay." She pulled a sheet from her clipboard and wrote an address before handing it over. "This is the delivery warehouse the goods come from. By all means go find out. And if it's anyone's fault down there, feel free to use your knowledge of pain receptors and pressure points on them."

***

Gaian 16 held several advantages for potential corp settlement. It was located on the brink of a stellar cliff, known locally as The Edge. Near the leading verge of the galaxy arm, it was as close to a true void as any habitable planet yet found by the Sphere. A settlement there could prove invaluable in the future as a testing post for intergalactic travel or weapons which could react badly with any nearby mass.

A peculiarity of evolution had given the planet's vegetation a heavily accelerated growth cycle. Plant growth cut back would grow back to its original size within a day

Secondly, a peculiarity of evolution had given the planet's vegetation a heavily accelerated growth cycle. Plant growth cut back would grow back to its original size within a day. The potential for farming was quickly identified, prompting a short but cut throat bidding war for the planet's contract. And

By "Daedle"

now Gaian 16 was the main provider of reconstituted vegetable matter across the Aquila Rift.

The unique ecology, however, provided equally unique challenges. The floral growth was so accelerated as to be almost predatory. No mega fauna existed anywhere on the planet, and it had been postulated that the ecologically advanced vegetation literally strangled any large animals before they could find an ecological niche. This meant humans had to force themselves sideways into the ecosystem.

The same boon to agriculture, where a patch of ground could be farmed for all vegetable matter to shipped off world one day and would be there next for the same treatment, also meant any settlement had to be actively defended from an ever encroaching rainforest. Burn backs and soil eradiation were daily chores around each township. But even then the plant life found a way, until mould and fungus would find a hold within a structure and grow, eating mortar and forcing apart prefab blocks until the building was unsafe and would have to be demolished and rebuilt.

In a township which might consist of two dozen buildings this was not much of a problem. But when it came to what would be Gaian's capital city, Gaian Prime, the area

It had been postulated that the ecologically advanced vegetation literally strangled any large animals before they could find an ecological niche

and building number and size meant a different approach was required. And this was where the Bubble was designed.

An immense conductive alloy canvass, the Bubble stretched over the whole city, anchored at Prime's circumference by being driven eight metres into the ground. The Bubble secreted toxins and was charged with direct current, nullifying any spores or seed which came into contact with it, and allowing the burn back teams which patrolled the perimeter daily, to focus on the plants and not on the buildings on the inside. The Bubble also provided a secondary benefit to Prime's residents. The mega trees found on the interior of Gaian 16's continent

released wind-borne spores year round. These ranged in size from the bacterial, to the width of a man's fist. The larger variety popped on contact, releasing pollen motes in the millions, each species of which had proven to cause extreme hay fever-like symptoms.

Gaian Prime's location was on the edge of a natural harbour. The bay was most likely an ancient meteor crater, forming an almost perfect circle open at one side to a deep water channel between two of Gaian 16's oceans. The location was perfect for settlement, not only in a naturally calm bay, but also the city built at the bay's eastern shore would face its own harbour westward, away from the prevailing winds from the landmass's interior, and allow the only permanent opening in the Bubble around the sea lane.

He caught a whiff of the crowd's collective emotion. Anger permeated, but he sensed that just rode the wave of something more substantial beneath

It was on this harbour where Prime's warehouse district was located, and where Cole now arrived.

There were dozens of warehouses, the smallest still more than 50 metres wide, and all following the curve of the shore around the bay. And outside each were knots of people. He caught a whiff of the crowd's collective emotion. Anger permeated, but he sensed that just rode the wave of something more substantial beneath.

He followed the directions to the building where the hospital supplies should be held. Judging by the clothes worn by the people gathered outside this one distributed supplies for most of the city's municipal services. And going by how hard they shouted and the words they used it was not just the hospital which had run out.

By "Sneaky Chris"

A man in stood on a pile of pallets at the office's door, speaking loudly and trying to answer three questions at once. Sweat stains darkened around his chest and armpits and he looked if he had had less sleep than Cole.

Without seeing inside he knew the warehouse would be empty. Behind what he took to be the manager, smaller knots of workmen in overalls and heavy gloves lounged around. With nothing to do they talked and cast the occasional worried look to the crowd.

"I wondered how long it would take you."

Cas leant casually against a linked fence, arms crossed with a sardonic smile. She wasn't wearing her pistol, but she was in uniform.

"What you doing here?"

"Seems to be where all the action is." She indicated the crowd. "I wouldn't try and force your way to the front, if I were you. Most of them have been here for a while. It wouldn't take much for them to turn ugly."

"But… what do the military need supplied?"

"Ammo"

He had reached the same conclusion, but was not in the mood to play games. "Noted. But why are you here?"

"Same reason you are, I'd say."

He frowned. "Supplies."

"That's affirmative."

"But… what do the military need supplied?"

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"Ammo," she said simply. And when she saw his questioning look, "Did you think we just sit on an ever growing pile of munitions? Ninety percent of what we have is used in training. Since this morning that's been stopped though. No more deliveries have come in."

He frowned. The military would get priority even over the hospitals in corp supply lines.

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"Let me show you something." She stepped away, showing the spot she had leant on hid a freshly clipped flap in the chain link. She saw Cole looking and shook her head in a *don't ask questions* way, and he pushed his way through.

The fence led to a gap between two warehouses, opening out on the waterfront. The air flowed more freely here, not nearly as close and with a grating edge of salt to the warm breeze.

Cargo ships with their typical flat-nosed prows lined the wharves, each almost as large as the buildings they docked at. Every berth was occupied, accompanied by imposing cranes. Here and there trucks were parked in designated bays, toy-like between the monolithic loading equipment and ships.

But no people.

The entire scene, kilometres of dock front, still and silent but for the slap of the waves on piers.

The quiet was unsettling. Cole had been on Gaian for years, and he had never seen such calm, such stillness since arriving onplanet.

The calm continued out to sea. Ships, as many as where in dock now, lay at anchor with nowhere to go.

"It's the same at each warehouse as here," said Cas. "All the workers are either standing around or have been sent home. There's nothing for them to do."

The entire scene, kilometres of dock front, still and silent but for the slap of the waves on piers.

"But why?" he said.

Cas pointed out over the bay, towards the hole in the Bubble where ships could sail freely out to the stretch of open ocean. Outside of the bay a ten kilometre wide channel separated the mainland from an island designated as Gaian's spaceport. It received and launched the super lifters from the upper atmosphere. Set outside the city for safety reasons, its own seaport allowed

the constant flow of goods from outsystem to Gaian to be shipped directly to Prime or the outlying townships. The returning 'lifters were loaded with vegetable matter for shipping to other sectors and systems.

Cole had only been at the port once on the day of his arrival, but it left him with the profound impression of a structure the size of a city, designed and built for the sole purpose of constant unloading and loading, never ceasing, as if it were the lungs of the colony planet.

Only right now, it was as still as the dock he stood on.

Only then did he realise he wasn't look at stars, but star ships. Cargo haulers, kilometres long, massive enough to be seen from the ground, hanging motionless in orbit.

"That's not right." Only after he said the words did he realised he whispered them.

"And there's something else," said Cas, and looked upwards.

He followed her gaze. Stars twinkled low the sky. There was a discord in what he saw, only recognisable when he concentrated; it wasn't even midday yet. Only then did he realise he wasn't look at stars, but star ships.

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Cargo haulers, kilometres long, massive enough to be seen from the ground, hanging motionless in orbit.

"That's not right," he said again, then to Cas, "why aren't they docking?"

"I think they already have," she said. She waved to the warehouses fanning out behind them. "Their cargo has already been delivered and consumed.

He could only think of one thing it could mean. "There have been no arrivals," he said. Such a thought seemed unnatural.

There were always arrivals and departures. Constant burn offs from the spaceport as the massive ships fought to lift themselves through Gaian 16's gravity, like rising suns every half hour. At night the light reached Cole's own apartment windows and was as part of the background of his routine as the ever present street noise.

"First our connection to the Sphere goes, and then ships stop arriving,"

"Seems too much of a coincidence to me"

Cas nodded. "That's my conclusion. And do you want to know what's really frightening?" He didn't think he did. Over the past few years he'd settled unto a comfortable if unpleasant life, a routine he had slowly watch come undone over the past day. His eyes were still on the far distant space port, great silvery arms and grey sheet towers reflected light back at him. But no activity. He felt Cas's eyes on him. She didn't wait for a response.

"The brass don't know why. They're trying to pretend they do, but why would they send me out here to find out where everything was if they already knew?"

She joined him looking out at the port, and then up to the ships hanging in the sky. "And have you noticed the ships here haven't left yet? They've been filled with produce but they're just hanging there, like they have no place to go."

"First our connection to the Sphere goes, and then ships stop arriving," he said. There was nothing he had ever heard about a planet being suddenly cut off. Surely if something had happened, even for short time, it would be all over the news?

"Seems too much of a coincidence to me," said Cas. "Which begs your question; why?"

Cole could not begin to imagine, but was suddenly overwhelmed with the sensation that he very much did not want to find out.▪

....END OF PART 1....

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By Stuart Smith

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